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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role of the classroom in bringing students of different backgrounds together and the role of the teacher in creating an atmosphere in which students not only get along well with each other, but also develop respect and appreciation that they carry with them outside of school. There is a need to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony within the educational environment to offset the ill effects of stereotyping and prejudice that can inhibit multicultural education. The paper also discusses teacher attitudes and resistance to multicultural education and ethnic events, stemming in part from their limited education and experience in these areas. It is concluded that schools are becoming more diverse each year, reflecting changes in society. Schools can no longer afford to ignore racial and cultural tensions nor the differences in learning styles that these cultural differences create. (Contains 5 references.) (GLR)

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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR ALL

PAPER PRESENTED IN THE FOURTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OF THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

MITRA FALLAHI, DETROIT: FEBRUARY 1994

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I have been a teacher and an advocate of multicultural education in colleges since 1990. In all the semesters which I have taught multicultural education I have always followed the research and the growth of this movement. In my opinion multicultural education is an integral part of this society. As a foreign born person who came to the U.S. at the age of 21 and who has traveled in some European countries, the first feature of this country which struck me was its diversity. Coming to this country in 1979, I soon realized (observed) that the myth that Americans are all blond and blue-eyed, with some black people included in the crowd, is far from the reality. Even though I arrived in the Midwest, I recognized the diversity of people. The diversity became more obvious when I visited the coasts. I should confess, however, that during the early months of staying in the U.S. I assumed that every person with mongoloid feature or every Hispanic, Chicano, or Latino was a foreigner.

Unlike many people who are born in a community in this country and who grow up, reside, and pursue a career here, we foreigners travel and we see the fact of this society, that Americans are a group of people like people all around the world,

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of any race, background, and with so many different traditions. The expectation of a person who loves to see people living together in peace and harmony is that Americans should mingle together well so that they remain united. Unfortunately, this was not the case as I learned more and more about this society.

In those days (1979-80) there was a one-cent stamp with the message of "the ability to write, a first step in democracy"! Being an educated person from a third world country, I appreciated the depth of that writing. As I pursued my education in the U.S., my trust in the role of education in strengthening the human race grew stronger and stronger and finally I changed my major and started my PH. D. in the area of education. Recognizing the lack of equity and educational opportunities in education, I became interested in research and teaching in the area of multicultural education which I have done ever since. While writing my dissertation I decided to become certified in secondary English. Pursuing certification gave me the opportunity to have more than 100 hours of observation in different schools followed by a semester of student teaching for which I chose an inner city high school in Milwaukee.

Having taught multicultural education along with other courses in behavior management and special education made me confident going into an inner-city school and working with students of different backgrounds. I was also curious to see how well I could apply theory to practice. There is no doubt that my experience in teaching urban students just reinforced my belief

in theory. But there were two points about multiculturalism which made me aware of what a complex phenomenon it is and that there are aspects of it which need more research. The first concept was that multicultural education is a challenge for all. In schools, specifically, it is a challenge for every student, every educator and everyone involved in the life of the school as an institution.

We know that the primary goal of multicultural education is to create equal opportunity in education for all members of all cultures. The aim of multicultural education is to design a curriculum which reflects the contributions of all different people in this society, to give everyone their fair share of what belongs to all. We are concerned about a curriculum in which contributions of all different groups are reflected. We talk about methods of instruction which guarantee learning for all children regardless of their learning style. We want not only white children but **all** children to know how their ancestors took part in making this country and how they were treated. We also want children to know about each other. **We want them to know that, while a piece of this "mosaic" belong to them, other pieces belongs to other people.** Finally, we want children to appreciate and respect those who are not exactly like them whether through their culture and traditions, language or dialect, or physical appearance. Multicultural education is to help everyone recognize and appreciate the beauty and the enrichment of diversity and cherish it. Everyone means everyone from any cultural, ethnic, racial, religious background. Multicultural

education is to teach children their responsibility towards each other. In that case minority children have as much responsibility toward other minorities or non-minorities as well as people from other regions or followers of other religions. I would like to continue with incidents which I encountered in school which triggered and enhanced this idea in my mind.

In my American Literature class (junior level) I had an African American student, a very nice, caring, warm, studious, polite, and popular boy. However, he was a rich resource of stereotypes and jokes which were directed toward other minorities or people from different regions of the United States, for example: the potato farmers of Idaho, people from the South, Hmongs, etc. Dealing with the biases in this student was very difficult. Obviously, he was ignorant about the hatred that is caused by stereotyping but the attention that he got was damaging not only to himself but also to the other students who found him "cool" and therefore credible. At that time, I thought about that incident and became sensitive toward the biases of students against different cultural, racial, regional, religious, or national groups. I found that students were prejudiced against each other or against people they did not even know on the basis of some biased notions. Jewish students against blacks, black students against Hmongs, Hispanics against blacks, ... Students did not really make friends with each other. They most likely mingled with their own groups except in cases when they were asked to get involved in cooperative activities in the classroom or at school. After these observations, I came to believe that

we have to fight stereotyping, that we have to educate our students to be respectful and appreciative of other cultures and people who are not exactly like them. Then again I thought about multiculturalism but with a broader perspective. In his article David Azzolina (1993) mentioned that geographical region is a useful starting point for thinking about multiculturalism. Multiculturalism encompasses a regional view that acknowledges the value of different vantage points and environment.

Other incidents have happened which support my idea that minorities are also equally responsible for recognizing the rights of others and for respecting each other. After the Los Angeles riots, one major problem was between African-Americans and Korean-Americans (Asian-Americans).

In a recent incident in a school in Milwaukee, seventh graders were asked to write poems. Unfortunately, a lot of hatred towards whites was heard in the poems written by African-American students. In another one of my multicultural classes, a student of mine described the situation of three gangs in an inner city high school in Racine (a small town near Milwaukee). The three gangs were of White, African-American, and Hispanic background. My student mentioned that the school authorities tried their best to keep those gang activities outside the school. There was never any effort to help these gangs put their hatred behind them and get along with each other.

I looked for research which supports my ideas. In a study Zisman and Wilson (1992) have researched the relationship between loose-knittedness of peer groups and cross-"race" interaction. They concluded that "the formal school organization and climate shape the implicit multicultural assumption transmitted to students." (p.104) The research continues with the statement that "inner-racial contact is largely confined to the formal settings of the schools, particularly the classroom." (p.106) These findings are further implications of the importance of the roles of classrooms and schools in bringing students of different background together, hence the role of the teachers who are instrumental in creating an atmosphere in which students not only get along well with each other but also develop respect and appreciation which they take with them outside of school. Therefore, the role of multicultural education becomes more evident and also the awareness of teachers regarding multicultural education becomes very important which leads to the second part of my presentation. However, before beginning the second part I would like to bring up a couple of points which are important in implementing multicultural education in an atmosphere of peace and harmony, whether in our classes at colleges, teaching the future teachers, or in classes at schools.

At the beginning of my multicultural class this semester I have tried to give my students the objectives of multicultural education reminding them that we are not going to put one or another group of people on trial. We are trying to diagnose the problems which have emerged from lack of equity and try to solve

them. However, this effort is only doable in an atmosphere of peace and harmony. If students feel attacked or blamed for what has happened in the past over which they have had no control, they will become defensive and their hurt feelings will lead to resentment toward the subject of multiculturalism which is not at all helpful.

The next point which supports my opinion is the experience I had in the inner-city last year and what I heard from a very dedicated student of mine who is student teaching in an inner-city now. This is the resistance of minority students to accept and trust white teachers or those not from their own background. This also stems from preconceived notions which some of those students have and might have been strengthened by misconduct of one or more teachers. In some instances even teachers' behavior has been innocent, which again supports the idea how important it is for teachers to be well aware of multicultural education. But before I start the second part I would like to conclude that the mission of multicultural education is not just to teach white people about other cultures or to reflect the contributions of all minorities in history. At the same time, we have to fight hatred and prejudice of any kind.

Pursuing the research in this area for suggestions, I read Janis Koeppel's (1992) discussion about the idea of sister schools so that children from different schools in different

parts of the country learn about each other. She then quotes Frances Kendall on the goals of multicultural education which are:

> ..first, to teach children to respect others' cultures and values as well as their own; second, to help all children learn to function successfully in a multicultural, multiracial society; third, to develop a positive self-concept in those children who are most affected by racism- children of color; fourth, to help all children experience both their differences as culturally diverse people and their similarities as human beings in positive ways; and fifth, to encourage children to experience people of diverse cultures working together as unique parts of a whole community. (p. 170)

The second part of my discussion also goes back to the time I worked or observed a high schools in Milwaukee. There were blocks of times for the promotion of multiculturalism. For example, minorities were given a week or a day or a short period of time when pictures of outstanding minority figures were posted on the wall. I noticed that different minorities had a better chance of gaining attention if the students in that school were predominantly from a certain background. For example, in high schools where the majority of students were Hispanics, they celebrated the Mexican Fiestas. In a predominantly African American school, the Black History month was observed. Every now and then a couple of hours was given to a native American group

to have a pow-wow (mostly on Fridays when the possibility of absentees in schools, especially inner-city schools is the highest). Meanwhile in the elite suburban schools where the majority of students came from European backgrounds students were busy discussing Dante and Chaucer in their English classes. It did not seem as if they needed to know about minorities. The very small number of minorities in their school came from more affluent families and mingled well with their classmates from the Eurocentric background. However, what struck me besides the limitation of the time given to multiculturalism, making it more or less like an event than a fundamental trend was the attitude of the teachers toward this event. It seemed to me that most teachers found it as an order for an activity from the main office.

So, it was time to decorate their classrooms with something related to minorities, or to take their students to a festival, exhibition, or activity which sounded like a field trip kind of fun than an awareness of a culture. Most teachers didn't find multiculturalism related to their area, especially subjects like math or sciences. Once I even heard a high school teacher with a Ph. D. who claimed to be certified in every possible area and at time taught a secondary methods course at college having difficulty remembering the word "multicultural" when he was referring to "hot" topics in education today.

In most cases, more experienced teachers had not have an in-depth insight into multiculturalism. Some have attended a workshop or an in-service, but the idea that multiculturalism should be an integral part of the curriculum seemed to be missing. Math teachers who found multicultural education irrelevant to their subject didn't know that paying attention to different learning styles of their students and applying different instructional methods as is emphasized in multicultural education might help them with their teaching. My question was why don't teachers realize the importance of multicultural education although they work in a culturally diverse school?

Sleeter (1992) has researched the knowledge and understanding of teachers regarding multiculturalism. Teachers in her study " were a self selected group." She concluded that:

> Of the 26 teachers in this study who discussed the relationship between their goals for teaching and multicultural education, seven saw it irrelevant, basing their argument on a conservative understanding of the society: that all Americans have fairly equal opportunity to achieve upward mobility , and those who do not progress well are hindered mainly by their own effort or deficient home backgrounds. Two more who were concerned with struggles of out-groups also articulated mostly conservative perspectives. They probably rejected the sociobiological explanation for racial inequality, and in so doing regarded themselves as relatively progressive. All nine were white,

but their sex and social background were diverse. The women acknowledged their own experience with sex stereotyping, one doing so at some length, but saw this as inescapable and too easily used as an excuse for not trying. Those who had grown up in socioeconomically poor homes and pulled themselves up, and as a result believed anyone else could do the same. They maintained that life is not easy and advancement requires work and at times tough skins, but in general opportunity is open to everyone. The remaining 17 teachers interpreted multicultural education broadly within a liberal understanding of society. Ten-all women-focused on personal and interpersonal connection. The six who defined multicultural education as human relations showed interest in interpersonal relations more than in how social mobility works, and willingly addressed the social and personal ambiance within their classrooms. Four of the eight teachers who focused on the struggles of out-groups were also interested mainly in nourishing students' self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. When asked about social processes outside the classroom, they acknowledged discrimination, and at times showed anger about unfairness. But they were concerned more with helping children cope with the world than change it. Their interpretation of multicultural education was feminine in their emphasis on connection, community, and feeling. It was not yet politicized, however; like the feminist teachers Kathleen Weiler studied, they valued "the creation of a

> classroom where 'it's okay to be human' in terms of relationships," but unlike them, had not "developed a commitment to raising issues and questioning accepted social values and ideology. The rest, whom I have classified broadly within liberalism, brought some degree of political criticism to their understanding of multicultural education. The teachers of color brought their awareness of institutional racism; two special education teachers brought awareness of how schools institutionalize failure. The other white teachers brought life experiences they began to connect with political criticism for reasons the data do not suggest. But for the most part, the teachers' perspective took as given the social context of the individual, and asked how to prepare the individual to live within the context. Most further assumed that, with some variations, society's rules apply similarly to everyone; the rules may not always be fair but they are acceptable, and processes for setting them are fair.(p. 52)

Although the majority of teacher education programs currently require students to take at least one course in multicultural education, there are a lot of teachers at schools who do not have any training in multicultural education. For most teachers, their knowledge of multicultural education stems from a one-day workshop or in-service which at best might make their work with diverse students easier. With a limited knowledge of multiculturalism and without believing and accepting

multicultural education as an integral force for changing the educational society, those teachers cannot transfer the multicultural values to the students.

In conclusion, as Robin Pennock (1993) pointed out, students can learn to appreciate diversity that transcends race, religion, and nationality. Principals should try to obtain parental commitment, initiate staff development programs, broaden the definition of multiculturalism to include behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and gender, and make multiculturalism a year-round crusade, ask students to "experience" others' differences, and establish a task force.

Whether it is the principals who are responsible or the school system in general, something needs to be done. School populations are getting more and more diverse every year and so is society. They have to get along with each other. The schools not only can't afford to have racial, cultural,... tensions, they should also help solve the social problems which emerge from lack of understanding and peace among people of different backgrounds.

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